

THE BOSS AND LENA

A Gardendale Story. By E. J. RATH, Author of "The Gardendale Burglar Cure," etc.



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stayed, which was all that the Boss contracted to do. Some of the weaker folk began to cavil because Mr. Dexter had not made other clauses in the agreement, but it was too late now. The question of hours was more serious, and when the Boss abolished all breakfasts served earlier than 7:30 o'clock there was a threatened outbreak. Mr. Dexter had to be called in to quell it, and they politely reviled him as he did it.

Pay was another matter which went right down to the base of things. There was suspicious unanimity in the demand, which was voiced in every dwelling in the park. The housewives started to put their feet down, only to discover that they had become sadly out of practice at the sort of thing. Their efforts were feeble, and they could not hold against the onslaught. Besides, nobody cared to be the first to break the charm. It had been so long since a girl had left her place that none ventured to take the responsibility of precipitating an exodus.

So it was that Gardendale fell into the clutches of a boss as powerful, satanic and domineering as any who ever ruled a city, ran a state or conducted the affairs of a nation.

It was the Boss's latest ultimatum that brought the park folk face to face with a crisis: a week's vacation for every girl, another raise in pay, and (this was for the Boss's private demand) \$5 a month for herself! Mr. Dexter conveyed the answer.

"Positively no, Della," he said, which meant that Gardendale was mad.

"Some av us'll be goin', this," remarked the Boss calmly.

"All right," said Mr. Dexter. "But when the first one goes, back goes your pay to twenty-eight."

"Sure, I'll be leavin', too," said the Boss, with all the serenity of power.

He reported back to the conference in progress at Mr. Gates' house that between twenty-five and thirty girls would probably leave at the expiration of a week.

"We have endured enough," said Gardendale. "Let them go. We have permitted this boss to rule us as if we were children. Now we will rise up and crush her."

"We will do our own work if necessary," said the women.

"We will help," said the men.

It was hereupon that the strike would begin. The village stores were almost denuded of their canned goods. The club had begun to lay in an amazing supply of provisions, in response to an avalanche of advance orders for dinners, luncheons and even breakfasts. Gardendale was humming with excitement. Independence day was coming. The struggle was at hand. The privations of war were to be met with a laughing face. After all, it might really be fun.

When Mr. Dexter arrived home that evening his wife opened the door herself and dragged him into the living room. Her manner was at once mysterious and agitated.

"Horace," she said, when they were beyond the earshot of any one who might listen, "read this."

She thrust into his hand a crumpled envelope, and Mr. Dexter, somewhat bewildered by all this unusual performance, extracted from it a single sheet of paper and read:

"Miss Della Monahan, I am p'ees to hear you ar your place leaving wit me Dexter, and will you p'ees rite for me and say is it nise place as I am looking for nise place in country. I am gude cook with much hard work, being here in this country I yr think I like your place fine so will you p'ees let me no when you ar goin m address is miss Lena Schlottenhauser genl delivery pos offe New York P. S. I have a friend wants place to, so p'ees rite quick."

"Lena Schlottenhauser," Mr. Dexter looked up from the letter inquiringly.

"Oh, I know we haven't any right to see it," broke in his wife excitedly. "But Della Mary left it lying on the kitchen table when she went out, and I just couldn't help reading it. And then something happened that made it so important that I knew you ought to see it."

"What happened?" asked Mr. Dexter.

"Why, Della Mary told me this afternoon that the girls had decided to stay another week and give us more time to

make up our minds about the wages and other things."

"Hum," said Mr. Dexter, reading the letter again.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked his wife.

"I think it is interesting," said Mr. Dexter.

"Hadin't I better write to this girl immediately and see what she will come for?"

"I don't see how you can do that," said Mr. Dexter. "This letter wasn't written to you. It's addressed to the Boss. You haven't any legal right to know anything about it. If you answered it the Boss would know in a minute that you had read her letter, which would place you in an undignified position."

"I didn't think of that," said Mrs. Dexter. "But it does seem a shame not to be able to take advantage of a chance like this. Two girls, mind you, because this one says she has a friend. Why, I'd let Della and Lizzy go in a minute if I could only get those two girls."

"How about the rest of Gardendale?" asked her husband. "Don't forget our responsibilities there, my dear."

"Oh, dear," sighed Mrs. Dexter. "I wish you hadn't ever invented this Boss."

Mr. Dexter had the same wish, but he ignored his wife's comment.

"Better see that the letter gets back in the kitchen," he said. "And, if I were you, I wouldn't say anything about it to anybody. Let's see what turns up. I'm interested in the Boss's proposition of the strike."

Gardendale did not know at first exactly how to take the postscript. Some who had grown militant after long months of servitude, were for making it a lock-out on the day originally set, thus setting an example of courage and independence to the world. But the truce was finally accepted, although it was made quite clear on both sides that there would be no yielding.

Mrs. Dexter found much to do in the kitchen in the next few days. She was hoping to catch the Boss off her guard, for she was dying to know if the Boss had written to Lena Schlottenhauser and if Lena had made any further overtures. But Della Mary had a countenance whose immobility might be likened to that of some famous general in a battle. It told Mrs. Dexter nothing. If the Boss was disturbed, she did not betray the fact by word or look.

Then the postman brought another letter for the Boss. As Mrs. Dexter took it from him her hand trembled, for she recognized at a glance the gnarled script of Lena Schlottenhauser. Mrs. Dexter received all the mail in person these days. She fingered the letter nervously as she carried it out to the kitchen. It was apparent at once that the Boss recognized the address, too, for a scowl flickered across her brow as she thrust the envelope into the pocket of her apron and continued to knead the bread. When Mrs. Dexter realized that the Boss did not intend to read her letter in the presence of the titular head of the house she left the kitchen, sighing.

The receipt of the second epistle from Lena was promptly reported to Mr. Dexter when he reached home. He only wagged his head solemnly and affected an air of wisdom. After dinner Mrs. Dexter made a few early evening calls. On her return she burst into her husband's study like a gale laden with millinery and leeches.

"More letters!" she cried, slamming the door behind her. "From Lena! One at Mrs. Wilson's—one at the McPhersons—one at the Fletchers—and goodness knows how many more!"

Mr. Dexter raised his eyebrows in mild surprise.

"Lena is an ambitious correspondent," he remarked.

"Ambitious!" exclaimed Mrs. Dexter. "Why, that poor girl is just crazy to get a place in the country. Somehow she has heard that a lot of girls are leaving. How she came to write to Della Mary goodness only knows. But these other letters are addressed to the mistresses themselves. Think of that! And she tells Mrs. Fletcher that she can get six or eight girls, all German. Wouldn't it be just ideal if we could only get those girls?"

"Um—m," said Mr. Dexter, "has the boss said anything about her letter?"

"Not a word. She put on her hat and went out right after dinner. I met her coming out of Mrs. Fanshawe's;

she was headed for Mrs. Gates' house."

"Anybody writing to Miss Schlottenhauser?" asked Mr. Dexter.

"Mrs. Fanshawe is writing this very minute. She's going to ask her how many she can get—to get all she can, in fact. Oh, Horace! Just think. We are going to break this strike. If it isn't an intervention of Providence, I never heard of one."

Housewives held hurried conferences in Gardendale all next day. Mrs. Fanshawe's letter to Lena was mailed in the presence of half a dozen anxious ladies. The Boss was busy, too. Most of the day that belonged to Mrs. Dexter she spent in a house-to-house canvass. As stealthily as her physique would permit, the Boss made trips from kitchen to kitchen, across the rear lawns, hopping over hedges unostentatiously. The air was surcharged with Lena; whispered conversations buzzed with the rhythmic name of Schlottenhauser. Late in the afternoon the Boss herself was seen to post a letter, but whether it went to Lena or to one of the Boss's secret agents in the city, none could tell but Della Mary herself.

On the second day following the renewed efforts of Lena to find a haven in Gardendale, Mrs. Fanshawe's house presented the appearance of a tea party. Half the ladies of the park were there to await the coming of the letter. Wonderful to tell, it came in the first mail. Mrs. Fanshawe ripped open the envelope with unsteady fingers. The letter read:

"Miss Fanshawe! I am p'ees to hear you yr twelf girl like self all for places. p'ees hurry to rite and say shall we come yrs Miss Lena Schlottenhauser."

"Glory! Glory! Glory!" shrieked little Mrs. Wilson, and she seized the matronly Mrs. Gates about the waist and waited her up and down the parlor. Mrs. Gats was experiencing such a queer feeling of elation that she submitted, as a good-natured elephant might tolerate the well-meant overtures of a playful poodle. The other ladies jumped up and down in their places with delighted squeals.

"Lena forever! Lena forever!" sang Mrs. Wilson, now engaged in a solo terpsichorean effort. Mrs. Gates having collapsed, breathless, into a chair.

Mrs. Fanshawe was the first to speak with the voice of sanity.

"It will not do, of course," she said, "to bring all these girls out here until we know definitely that we want them, or until we know something about them. I suggest that I write to this girl and ask her to call. In that way I can get an idea of what she and her friends are like."

"The very thing!" chorused the ladies of Gardendale.

"Maybe she can produce more than a dozen," said Mrs. Wilson, panting. "Oh, I just would love to see Lena. I could hug her."

Before twenty-four hours had elapsed everybody in the park knew that Lena would call upon Mrs. Fanshawe on Saturday morning. The Boss knew it, too. She was silent and grim. Although some of her constituents, alarmed at the threatened Teutonic invasion, had shown signs of wavering, the Boss did not flinch, but doggedly mended fences all Friday evening. Secretly, however, the Boss was concerned. But she scorned to show even a momentary group of the rugged law.

On Saturday morning there was more porch scrubbing and sidewalk sweeping than Gardendale had seen since a new girl had entered the park. Coldly hostile eyes were trained on all approaches. Mrs. Fanshawe's house was picketed. Such pickets as were peremptorily ordered to indoor tasks manzoned to be busy at the front windows every time a train from the city was due.

Presently came the invader—in a hack! Some one, indeed, had poured wisdom into the ears of Lena. She ran no grannies of water pails and brooms. As the vehicle drew up at Mrs. Fanshawe's a small, neatly dressed figure, heavily veiled, hopped out and hurried busily up the walk. Before the pickets could gasp "That's her," Mrs. Fanshawe had opened the door herself and Lena was lost to view.

For a full hour the hack waited, which gave the boss time to stroll past the Fanshawe mansion, glare at its curtained windows and call the driver a scab. It had been agreed that Mrs. Fanshawe was to conduct the interview alone, and it seemed as if the ladies of Gardendale had been unleashed, like a pack of ravenous hounds, when the slam of a carriage door told the little world that Lena was going back to her people. As the hack went in full cry to Mrs. Fanshawe's the "help" made a counter dash to interview the Boss.

Mrs. Fanshawe's callers found her red-eyed, as though she had been weeping, but they took it for granted that they must be tears of joy, for that lady was beyond doubt, cheerful. Some thought they detected an air of mystery. "Lena tells me," she said, "that she can get a dozen at once, and is confident that the other girls, between them, can get a dozen more."

"She won't set up to be another boss?" asked Mrs. Gates suspiciously.

"Oh, no, I think not."

"What sort of a creature is she, anyhow?" demanded Mrs. Dexter.

"A very remarkable sort of girl," said Mrs. Fanshawe, addressing her neighbors, "shall we accept?"

"I suggest," said Mrs. Fanshawe, "that we wait a day or two longer. Lena wishes to communicate with me further."

While the conference in Mrs. Fanshawe's parlor was still in session the word that Lena had "made good" went from kitchen to kitchen with uncanny speed. A committee of three called on the Boss. A crisis was in the air. Politics was rampant in the park.

Mr. Dexter was reading on Sunday morning when he heard a heavy tread in the hall and looked up to see the Boss enter the living room.

"I'd like to spake a wurd, sor," she said in a tone that was new.

"Well?" said Mr. Dexter.

"Me an' th' girls 'll shay," said the Boss, dropping her eyes and fingering her apron.

"Hum," said Mr. Dexter, gazing out of the window. "I don't know that it will be possible, Della."

"At th' prisint terms, sor," said the Boss quickly.

Mr. Dexter pretended to reflect, preserving a calm exterior, although he was a furnace of joy within.

"Well," he said, after a long pause, "I'll see what some of the other families say, Della."

"Thank ye, sor," said the Boss. She looked at him with a troubled expression for a moment and then returned to the kitchen.

Mr. Dexter seized his hat and went forth, whistling "Battle of the Boyne." The Boss had surrendered! To Gardendale's everlasting fame, it kept its head in the hour of victory. It seemed it to be known that it was in no hurry whatever to accept the capitulation, yet it was magnanimous in the end. Still the housewives were wise enough to seize their advantage and make the defeat more crushing by abolishing the extra afternoon out and placing rigid restrictions on the privilege of receiving callers.

Mrs. Fanshawe and Mrs. Wilson were discussing the victory a week later.

"I simply cannot realize it," said Mrs. Wilson. "It's too glorious to be true; it's more than glorious, it's lovely. But doesn't it seem a shame that that poor German girl had all her trouble for nothing?"

Mrs. Fanshawe looked at her caller quizzically. Then she stepped to the door and closed it softly.

"Can you keep a secret?" she asked, seating herself very close to Mrs. Wilson and dropping her voice to a whisper.

"Can I? Mercy, yes," said Mrs. Wilson.

"Well, we've made it all right with Lena. She doesn't mind a bit."

"The dear, good-natured soul!" burst out Mrs. Wilson.

"Yes, we squared it all right with Lena," said Mrs. Fanshawe dreamily. Then suddenly: "You know my oldest son, Harry?"

"Yes. What's he got to do with it?"

"S—s—sh, dear. He's Lena."

Mrs. Wilson sat bolt upright and made a choking sound. Then she suddenly began to giggle queerly, and finally there was an explosion of hysterical laughter which landed her on her feet and sent her whirling down the room in a dance of utter abandon. At last she stopped for breath. Her nose tilted a little and she sniffed:

"Pooh! Another man's scheme."

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